A procedure for participatory orthography development

These steps assume a representative group of local stakeholders. Ideal group size is between 15 and 30 participants. Participants divide into groups of 3-6 people, with at least one literate person designated as “scribe” in each group. A completed basic phonological analysis is also assumed.

Step 1: Discuss what makes a good writing system
- This step might be very long or short depending on the potential for disagreement about writing system-related issues.

Step 2: Write words for each consonant and vowel
- All groups write a single word for each consonant and vowel
- Groups’ work is posted, compared, and discussed. Areas of inconsistency highlighted.

Step 3: Write words by semantic domain
- Each group chooses (or is assigned) a semantic domain that has a lot of words
- The group lists as many words as they can think of in that domain
- Groups’ work is posted; participants view and discuss each other’s work

Step 4: Write procedures
- Each group chooses (or is assigned) a simple procedure from daily life to write out.
- One person from each group reads the procedure to the larger group.
- Group’s work is posted; participants view and discuss each other’s work

Step 5: Assemble a grapheme chart
- As a large group, participants discuss each sound and decide on a tentative representation.
- First list sounds in which there has been inter-speaker consistency. This part of the orthography is already a success!
- Next list each sound that caused problems, along with each way in which it was represented so far. Discuss pros and cons of each option. Allow this to go on as long as needed.
- Emphasizing that decisions are tentative and can be changed, decide on one representation for each problem sound.
- If agreement cannot be reached during the session, facilitate further in-depth discussion.

Step 6: Write stories
- Each small group chooses (or is assigned) a simple narrative to write out.
- One person from the group reads the narrative to the large group. (Or groups exchange narratives and practice reading others’ work.)
At any stage throughout the process, participants can go back and revise their previous work based on more recent decisions. Re-writing the semantic domain wordlists and procedures at a later stage is especially useful.

**Other participatory processes for orthography development**

**Participatory Research in Linguistics** (Kutsch Lojenga 1996). Developed in Africa. Oriented toward word-level phonological analysis; works well in languages with complex phonology or where the phonological system is poorly understood. Includes strategies for tone.

**Alphabet Design Workshop** (Easton 2003; Easton & Wroge 2012). Developed in Papua New Guinea. A more holistic approach where participants write whole stories rather than lists of words. Works well in languages with simpler word-level phonology and where speakers are literate enough (in another language) to write stories.

**Participatory methods have also been used in these language development-related activities:**

- Gauging interest in language development (Kluge & Choi 2016)
- Strategic planning (Hanawalt et al. 2016)
- Variation, multilingualism, language attitudes (Truong & Garcez 2012)
- Literacy (Varghese 2013)
- Phonological and grammatical analysis (Kutsch Lojenga 1996)

**References**


